

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL DANIEL B. ALLYN, CHIEF OF STAFF, MULTINATIONAL CORPS IRAQ, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ
TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2008

Copyright (c) 2008 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): With that, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, October 2nd, 2008. My name is Seaman William Selby, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today. Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your request; respect our guest's time by keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is Marine Corps Colonel -- I'm sorry. Today our guest is Brigadier General Daniel B. Allyn, chief of staff, Multinational Corps Iraq. And he will provide insight into the core focus and anticipated challenges over the next few months and highlight a few -- a couple of key issues, such as the transfer of the Sons of Iraq program to the government of Iraq.

And sir, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that now.

GEN. ALLYN: I do. Thanks a lot for that intro.

And good morning to all of you, and thanks for the opportunity to contribute to this online discussion about our mission and progress in Iraq. And I see that many of you are veterans of our armed forces, and I thank you for your continued service and commitment to keeping the American public better informed about the global war on terror.

I know that several of our BCT commanders have engaged you recently in this forum, and it's a pleasure for me to provide a bit on the corps-level perspective today.

The corps and our major commands have driven violence down -- (audio break) -- four-year lows and secured the Iraqi population in the progress -- in the process. Across Iraq, as many of you know, attacks are down 80 percent since June of '07. And we continue to focus on ridding the country of deadly munitions, and we've already found more than 57 percent above last year's cache finds so far this year.

Overall, we assess that AQI is in disarray. We've seriously diminished their ability to -- (inaudible) -- materiel and sustain violent attacks. And more importantly, the Iraqi population has rejected their ideology and their violent tactics, and this is robbing them of their essential support base.

We've interrupted the flow of foreign fighters and Iranian- trained special group criminals into Iraq, and we're also attriting their financing sources. When they do return, we continue to have great success with our Iraqi partners in killing or capturing them.

We've accomplished these gains while redeploying the five surge brigades, several coalition partners, and we continue to make these security gains while reducing our footprint and expanding our battlespace.

Our offensive tempo has also driven down Iraqi civilian deaths over 80 percent since the surge began. Shops are opening up, and families are going about doing what normal families do, including visiting parks, using swimming pools and the like.

Really, there's four primary factors, we feel, and that is the courage of our service members serving here in Iraq, the growth in increasing capability of Iraqi security force partners, the heroic contributions of the Sons of Iraq and the growing capacity of the government of Iraq to lead towards sovereignty.

We find ourselves clearly in a period of transition. Security gains and the increased capacity of the Iraqi security forces enable us to increase focus on non-kinetic operations, and three key areas of importance in this arena is to continue to professionalizing the Iraqi security forces, to continue to focus on transitioning the Sons of Iraq to the government of Iraq employ and to continue helping Iraq in securing its borders.

Quite frankly, the professionalization in the Iraqi army is headed in the right direction. We're now focused on delivering a similar growth in capacity across the rest of the partners and the Iraqi security force through trainer -- training, leader development and development of enabler capabilities.

We're working very, very closely with our Iraqi leadership, in both the government and the security forces, as we continue the successful transition of SOIs to government-funded employment.

They provided heroic service to their country in helping secure the stability now enjoyed. And we will not abandon them. And we are very confident that the government of Iraq will follow through. And this will prove to be the leading edge of reconciliation here in Iraq for the government.

The continued efforts in assisting Iraq, securing its borders will be focused on reducing violence and increasing opportunities for free and open commerce. And we'll continue to assist the government- of-Iraq-led efforts by partnering with the border forces and Iraqi security forces to prevent any maligned foreign influence from destabilizing the progress that is under way here.

As a final point before I turn to your questions, we're going to keep steady pressure on the enemy. And as Ambassador Crocker has said, we'll be counting on strategic patience that's going to be essential, in trying to capitalize on the gains, and continue to push toward a unified, democratic,

federal Iraq that can govern, defend and sustain itself and remains an ally in the war on terror.

And with that, I will turn it over for any questions that you may have.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir. And a note to the bloggers today -- please, ask your first question. And if we have time when we come back around, we'll do follow-up questions from each of you.

And Chuck, you were on the line first, so you can go ahead.

Q Good afternoon, General. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I wanted to ask about border security, sir. Where do you see Iraq needing the most assistance; what province, what area of the border is still the least certain for being controlled?

GEN. ALLYN: Thanks, Chuck, for that question. And as I stated, this is one of our key priorities, as we continue to assist the government of Iraq in securing itself. We have two areas that we're primarily focused on. Although we are working with the government of Iraq on a comprehensive strategy that secures their entire nation.

We continue to focus on preventing Iran from supplying lethal accelerants that are intended to destabilize the government and also preventing foreign fighters from crossing the border from Syria.

And both of these efforts have had recent effects that show that the comprehensive efforts by the government of Iraq, Iraqi security forces and our coalition forces are reducing the enemy's freedom of movement and their effectiveness.

Q Thank you.

GEN. ALLYN: I hope that answers your question.

Q Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much.

And Jarred, you were second on the line.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your service. Could you talk a little bit about your personal experiences, sir; what you see on the ground with the new elections law being passed, with the Sons of Iraq, Sahwa, being picked up? What's the feeling of the people that you speak to? And what are the challenges that you see coming up that you're kind of focusing on to keep ensuring success for the long term; you know, five, 10 years down the road?

GEN. ALLYN: Well, thanks Jarred. I'll touch your specific questions first, and then I'll reiterate a point that we tried to make up front. First of all, in terms of the election, what we're seeing and hearing from the people, particularly here in Baghdad -- I was just with one of our brigade combat team and battalion commanders earlier today in Kadimiya. And they are clear indications from Sunni and Shi'a alike of absolute hope and excitement about the opportunity to influence the leaders that will take their country forward.

So we are very optimistic about the provincial elections that are due to occur now by the end of January, will ensure that they can occur in a safe and secure environment and enable Iraq to determine Iraq's future.

In terms of the SOI transition, you know, that is absolutely an area of potential friction. But in matter of fact, it is a great news story for the government of Iraq. We're in the process of transitioning the first 54,000 in Baghdad as we speak. It's a very deliberate process. It's being closely monitored at the most senior levels, literally from the squad leader level on the ground up to the division commander level in Baghdad, to work through challenges as they emerge. As with anything important, there are different sides and different viewpoints, but the fact of the matter is that this is a great story for the government of Iraq. It's a story of progress. It's a story of emerging sovereignty. It's a story of successful achievement of essential security that enabled this to happen. It's a story of courageous service by SOIs and the recognition by their neighborhood, their local leaders and now their central government of their contributions.

And we believe it's a first and major stride toward national reconciliation, which is going to be essential as this national continues to develop.

And I would say as we look down the road toward the deeper threats that face this country, enabling Iraq to secure its own borders is essential to their long-term stability. It's why we're focused on helping them develop a comprehensive strategy and then teaching them how to do it. And they're getting after it, and we'll be here to help them with that.

I hope that answers your question.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Paul, you were next on the line.

Q Yeah. Hi, General. Thanks for talking to us. It's Paul McLeary from DTI. I was wondering if you can go into a little more detail about the SOI transition, what exactly this means. I know the -- we're handing out 54,000 to the Iraqi government. They're going to start paying them. But on a deeper level, what does this mean beyond just transitioning the financial obligations? And you know, if you can go into some detail about, you know, the interaction between the SOI and the Americans' interaction between -- what the SOI are saying about moving over to Iraqi government control.

GEN. ALLYN: Yeah, Paul, I appreciate your question. It is a very complex issue, and I don't mean to make light of it by zipping through comments about it. The fact of the matter is, this is not about transitioning payment. This is about national recognition. It's about national reconciliation.

As you know, over 80 percent of the serving Sons of Iraq are Sunni. And so the central government Shi'a and now many of the provincial leaders across the country have some concerns about the transition process. They are, however, committed to it -- Prime Minister Maliki has stated his commitment to this -- as a government, as a nation, and the most senior leaders, with General Abboud in Baghdad as a perfect example. They were never intended to be a permanent force and a permanent solution. They were established for security; that security has been secured for the nation, and it's -- so it's time to move forward.

And in addition to recognition by the government, there are a number of great programs under way to ensure those that don't transition into police and army security force positions move to employment through community-based workers programs, public works, service sites, a jobs program that teaches them life skills and then enables them to give those back to the community, many of these supported by us initially and transitioned to government of Iraq control as they take them on.

So it is a paced transition. We are starting in Baghdad. That will be the model. That will transition about half of those that are currently serving, and as conditions permit, we will begin to transition other provinces around the country.

I know that you all recognize the whole concept of reconciliation assumes the fact that it's a former enemy that is now being reconciled with his nation. And so the fact that the government of Iraq is crossing this bridge at this critical point we consider to be a great news story overall.

Q All right. Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Marisa, you are next on the line.

Q Sure. Thank you, sir. This is Marisa Cochrane with the Institute for the Study of War. We're seeing in the news over the past few days what seems to be an increase in number of attacks attributed to AQI. Can you talk about how this fits with what you're saying about AQI being degraded, what this suggests about their capabilities, and how that's going to affect -- how that does affect the Sons of Iraq?

GEN. ALLYN: That's a great question.

I think one thing we've learned about AQI is that they are a very resilient organization. They have the capacity to regenerate both leadership and small unit forces.

And what you should notice in the attacks that you're seeing is they are sporadic and they are not sustained. The savvy that AQI demonstrates is the ability to continue to get a public splash by executing these attacks in places, like Baghdad, that get media attention. Frankly, two attacks that occurred today were prevented from hitting their targets because of effective security measures, and so once again AQI murdered innocent civilians and caused about 39 total casualties, all but 10 or so that were civilian people. So they are targeting civilians, they are murdering innocents, and they are ruthless, but they are capable. And we will continue to work with the Iraqi security forces to target them and prevent them from achieving the effects that they hope to achieve.

They have shown a desire in the past, primarily in Mosul, to attack Sons of Iraq and to attack Iraqi security forces. The Sons of Iraq have proven themselves equal to the challenge, as have Iraqi security forces. They are not intimidated. They are standing their ground, and they are securing their population.

So we are respectful of AQI as a threat, but we will continue to degrade their capability and prevent them from destabilizing the great progress being achieved by Iraqi security forces and coalition forces here.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir. And we had a fifth blogger join us, I think.

Q Yes. This is actually Claire Russo from the Institute for the Study of War as well. And I just have a follow-on question to that, sir.

I wonder about if there's any concern, with this resurgence of attacks or increased level of attacks, if there's any concern about misattribution of attacks to AQI, as we've seen some reporting about the return of special groups. And to build on what Marisa said, just whether or not the sort of constant attribution of attacks to AQI is something that will frustrate the Sons of Iraq efforts as they see themselves as securing a neighborhood and potentially seeing possibly Shi'a insurgencies getting away with attacks while AQI is blamed and indirectly their lack of ability to secure their neighborhood.

GEN. ALLYN: Well, thanks, Claire, for the follow-up. And first of all, let me clarify, we are not seeing a resurgence of attacks. And in fact, 18 of the last 19 weeks, we have sustained attacks below 200 per week. This is at a 4-1/2-year low. And amidst those, occasionally on average one or two per day will get a high-profile attack. Those are assessed, as the two today, to have been AQI attacks. We -- (word inaudible) -- our assessment based on the facts on the ground and our understanding of the networks and ensure that we don't mislabel it.

We are not seeing a wedge being driven between the population and the Sons of Iraq. And to the contrary, the wedge that's being driven is between the population and al Qaeda in Iraq. The population is tired of them. They are tired of their heavy-handed tactics and they are not enabling them to have freedom of maneuver. And in fact, in the majority of cases, al Qaeda attacks are commuting from support zones outside the areas where they are attacking, because they are no longer welcome in the populations.

I hope that answers your question.

Q Sir, I'd just like to clarify, because I think I didn't communicate my question clearly. I didn't mean to say -- I wasn't specifically referring to the attacks today, and I also didn't mean the misattribution by the military or personnel on the ground. When we read -- all of our information comes from open source.

And a lot of the times, there's diagnosis by members of the media that say presumably this was al Qaeda in Iraq. And there isn't diagnosis necessarily coming from MNF-I press releases or military coverage of those attacks. And I just know that, that while, that the, that media here does affect, you know, Iraqis do get a hold of that, do see that sort of thing.

I wasn't, I wasn't, I wasn't trying to say that the military is misdiagnosing. I mean people who are watching from the outside misdiagnosing and that having an affect in turn on Iraq.

GEN. ALLYN: No. I understand. And what we feel and see from the population here, they do not confuse the source of the attacks to be anything different than -- as predominantly AQI.

This is -- they are the predominant users of suicide bombing attacks, both personal-borne and vehicle-borne. They have expressed in the public domain

their intent to continue with vehicle-borne IEDs. And they are largely the ones precipitating these attacks.

The principal attacks that we see from the special groups criminals, the Shi'a threat are not high-profile attacks like the suicide attacks. There are occasions principally up in MND-North where Sunni extremists other than AQI can be complicit in some of the attacks. But by and large AQI has been the principal precipitator of the attack. I hope this answers your follow-up.

Q Yes, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay.

We have time for just a few follow-up questions, so maybe one or two. Did anybody have any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah. This is Chuck.

General, what area of Iraq do you see as being a good candidate to next be turned over to complete Iraqi control?

GEN. ALLYN: Well, in fact, right now there are two provinces that are transitioned to Iraqi control this month. If conditions continue to stay as they are, in terms of the current security and meeting the needs of the governance and security there, both Wasit province and Babil province are scheduled to transition later this month. Q Thank you.

Q Sir, this is Marisa Cochrane with ISW.

Getting back to special groups, what are you -- you mentioned their return. I'm wondering if you can comment on what you're seeing thus far. Have you observed any changes in their tactics or organization since they've returned from training in Iraq?

And what are you doing to mitigate their attempts to stir up violence in advance of provincial elections?

GEN. ALLYN: The -- you've clearly highlighted the fact that there are special group criminals attempting to return from Iran. We aren't necessarily seeing physical evidence of a change in tactics. We are hearing that there is some intent to have new capabilities. It has not yet emerged. And I think a large reason it has not emerged is because of success of Iraqi security forces in eliminating the special group criminals' safe havens, the public display of -- (audio break) -- faces are all over points of entry in urban areas here in Iraq. So their ability to move back among the population is very difficult, and the population frankly does not welcome them home. They like the security that has returned while they've been away. They don't want to return to the past violence. And so largely -- (audio break) -- difficulty achieving their desires of returning.

It is something on which we maintain constant vigilance, and we will continue to work with our Iraqi security force partners both at the borders and in the population centers to deny them the opportunity to return and destabilize the government of Iraq.

Q Thank you, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: And thank you all for your questions and comments. Sir, I'd like to ask you: Do you have any final comments or anything you'd like to say?

GEN. ALLYN: Yeah, thanks for your commitment to getting the word out, and we appreciate the opportunity to give you a brief update. Overall, we are optimistic about the future. We continue to expect progress over the coming months. We know that there will be no shortage of challenges, but we continue to be hopeful in the government of Iraq's ability to continue to grow. And obviously I'm happy to follow up on any questions that I have left unanswered through our media relations officer, Major Tribus.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir, for your comments today and your answers.

Today's program will be available online at the bloggers' link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as the audio file and print transcripts. Again, thank you very much, sir, and our blogger participants.

END.